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ABSTRACT

As the emphasis on the inclusion of evaluation and assessment activities in the development and implementation of various school programs has increased, so has the need to address the question of whether or not these strategies can or do effectively assist in bringing about school change or program improvement. The following are conditions or factors which, from a practitioner's viewpoint, are essential to successful implementation of districtwide or school evaluation systems: (1) impetus or commitment from "top" levels of the system or unit; (2) evaluation and testing systemwide (unit--district, school, department, etc.); (3) felt need of expected participants; (4) intent to evaluate linked to action; (5) ownership--evaluation for instructional improvement needs to be internal in nature if instructional quality is the criteria; (6) agreement on purpose and activities; (7) evaluation should be ongoing and cyclical and should include analysis and feedback, determined need, developed action, and implementation action; (8) process of continued monitoring, assistance, and education for those involved; (9) provision of continuing education in evaluation methods; (10) never assume anything without adequate information; (11) provide the mechanics or necessary material; and (12) evaluation must be considered as a continuing process rather than a single event. (RL)

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EVALUATION AS AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY FOR INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT: ESSENTIAL CONDITIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

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EVALUATION AS AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY FOR INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT:
ESSENTIAL CONDITIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

As the emphasis on the inclusion of evaluation and assessment activities in the development and implementation of various school programs has increased, so has the need to address the question of whether or not these strategies can or do, in fact, effectively assist in bringing about school change or program improvement. Theoretically, evaluation should provide appropriate information which is then utilized to improve the instructional program. From an experiential standpoint, however, this too often is not the case. While it appears that many people believe that evaluation will assist, there is not much empirical evidence that providing an evaluation component in a program does ensure that improvement results.

If, theoretically, evaluation can be a powerful tool for instructional change, but if in practice this is not occurring, then reasons for the discrepancy must be examined. One primary hypothesis that can be proposed, is that it is extremely difficult, for many reasons, to effectively institute and implement an evaluation and testing system in the schools or on a districtwide basis. Evaluation strategies in name may be present, but in practice may not be implemented in a way that ensures that relevant information is obtained which produces appropriate action.

In school systems, the greatest impetus for the establishment of any type of testing and evaluation system has come generally from external sources. While this impetus has enhanced the perceived need for evaluation, and thus the role of evaluation, the source of this impetus has also presented some difficulties. A requirement for evaluation and student assessment regularly has been tied to programmatic funding whether for mandated programs, entitlements, or competitive grants. In addition, local boards, following the lead of federal and state agencies, have upon instituting new programs or changes, placed within the system a requirement for evaluation. However, while the reasons for the inclusion of evaluation may have been recognized by everyone involved, too often the actual internalization of the need has not occurred at the operational level, resulting in evaluation being done for someone "out there" rather than for "oneself". Thus, while it may appear that evaluation has taken place, in fact, this may only be a surface "shell", with nothing substantive actually having occurred. An evaluation intended to complete forms and meet requirements may thus become the modus operandi rather than an evaluation to aid in the improvement of instructional programs.

While recognizing that there are different purposes for evaluation, i.e., "go, no go" decisions, relative value judgments, auditing functions, status reporting, etc., the focus of discussion of this paper is on that of school and instructional improvement. Schools do address these other reasons, as necessary, but the primary purpose of evaluation within the school setting should be the assurance of the best instructional program possible. This requires among other things that appropriate data be provided which when analyzed can: assist in the identification of positive and negative forces; suggest actions to be followed to produce improvement where indicated or, maintenance of acceptable levels; indicate unworkable or non-productive practices to be discarded; and indicate where adaptations are appropriate. The resultant use of this information, then, should be adaptation or changes in the instructional program.

To succeed in making evaluation useful in school and instructional improvement, testing and evaluation activities must become an integral part of the total instructional program. To do so requires the effective institution and implementation of such activities on a continuing, on-going basis. This institutionalization does not occur by chance, but requires a great deal of attention, commitment, and effort from staff at all levels of the system. In working with schools to achieve the implementation of effective evaluation systems, certain conditions have emerged, the presence of which appear to be critical to success. Some prerequisite conditions may be very difficult to achieve, requiring the assistance or direction of others within the system, while other conditions are dependent upon direct action which evaluators can take. The intent of this paper is not to present answers to the problem of "how to" (which may require varied approaches), but to attempt to bring attention to these conditions as a first step towards eventual resolution.

The following are conditions or factors which, from a practitioner's viewpoint, are essential to successful implementation of districtwide or school evaluation systems.

1. <u>Impetus/commitment from "top" levels of the system or unit</u>. It is extremely important that there be an impetus for evaluation from the "top". In a school system, this would start with the superintendent and the governing board. This group must be committed to the improvement of the instructional program and the value of evaluation to this endeavor. They must impart to the schools, or the units, the importance of evaluation, the necessity for involvement, and a commitment of priority to this need. In addition, the decision makers in a district must understand the worth of the information when used appropriately for program improvement and the dangers in misuse. Without this support (incentive), evaluation attempts either may not succeed, or may not result in substantive change. Continued support for the concept needs to be provided by the "power base", so that the units of the system perceive the need on an on-going basis rather than as a "one-time occurrence", and thus act to initiate evaluation as an integral part of the education process.

2. Evaluation and testing systemwide (unit---district, school, department, etc.) If the concept of evaluation is valuable then the activities required of it should be implemented systemwide and not just in funded schools or special programs. When the activities are limited to specific schools, or areas, the purpose of evaluation appears to become one of meeting external requirements. Evaluation is then looked upon by other schools, and also by those directly involved, as something to "do for the feds", etc. rather than for one's own improvement. Evaluation should be considered to be valuable and necessary for improvement for the total district instructional program. In the individual school this concept would mean that evaluation should become a routine aspect for all instructional areas, not just reading, math, etc.

3. Felt need of expected participants. Effective evaluation begins when there is a felt need and an understanding of the value to be attained from participation. Schools must be continually assisted, by those within the system, to perceive the need for evaluation in the instructional program and what evaluation can do for them. While educators don't always want to find out about their programs, everyone can be helped to see where evaluation can be of importance to them, can be used advantageously, and can be made to work for, rather than against, them. This is not a one-time understanding, or inservice topic, but needs continued emphasis as the process of evaluation evolves.

4. Intent to Evaluate Linked to Action. While the intent to evaluate must first be evident, the mere act of proclamation does not, of itself, make it so. It is not enough just to say there will be evaluation, action must follow words. In addition, neither does the planning of evaluation activities guarantee that they will, in fact, take place, let alone proceed in an effective manner. Continued support must be provided to ensure that evaluation is actually occurring, with incentives for the participants to do so.

5. Ownership. Those involved in evaluation must "own" the process. Thus, evaluation for instructional improvement needs to be internal in nature if instructional quality is the criteria. External evaluation may assist in, and facilitate moving towards, the goal (and is indeed important in many ways), but internal evaluation is a critical component if actual improvement is to take place. By internal evaluation is meant that those within the unit who will be directly affected by the evaluation are direct partners in the "evaluation process". By external is meant that someone outside the unit, i.e. evaluator, district administrator, outside auditing firm, etc., maintains control of the operation. To be truly functional the evaluation cannot be allowed to be considered someone else's.

There must be an agreement to "own" all of the system by those primarily involved. In this way the activities will become internalized, acceptable functions, with the information received relevant to the decisions to be made.

6. Agreement on Purpose and Activities. For evaluation to succeed, there should be common agreement among all involved, as to the purpose for evaluation, with a common understanding of all terms necessary. Various agreements must be reached within the school, or system, as to the types of data that will have meaning, the categories of results to be obtained, the real questions to be answered, what will be done with the information, etc. To not have these agreements is to court disaster by allowing various segments of the organization to seek different interpretations from the information or to use the information in ways not intended. Thus, no meaningful conclusions can be reached which will be viewed by all as appropriately derived from the data analysis. For example, if schools using evaluative data for improvement find that district administration is using this same data to make other judgments, then the schools may well begin to subvert the operation to ensure that the information cannot be used against them.

7. Evaluation Should be Ongoing and Cyclical. Evaluation is not a one-time occurrence. It should be part of the total instructional cycle:

    1. analysis and feedback

    2. determine need

    3. develop action

    4. implement action

    While there should be specific periods of time set aside to bring facts together, within the school year the process should be ongoing.

8. Monitor and Assist. To insure that the unit staff is implementing effective evaluation strategies, there must be a process of continued monitoring, assistance, and education for those involved. This should take place according to the level of need exhibited by the participants. As time goes on, needs change and assistance must be there at the appropriate moment. By continually monitoring evaluation activities, it is possible to intervene at the critical moment, redirect efforts, refocus, provide knowledge and inservice, etc.

9. Training in Evaluation Methods as a Necessity. There should be a continuing educational process involved for those participating in evaluation and should be directed toward the needs of individuals at specific points in time. Very few school personnel understand how to isolate questions, collect appropriate information, analyze, use the analysis, set the direction for the next step(s), and link evaluation and test information to instruction. Evaluation training often must be done on an individual basis and may be less effective when done in large groups and at one-time settings.

10. Never Assume Anything. Never assume that because people say they are evaluating that they are, that because they are going through the motions of evaluation that something substantive is occurring or will occur, or that because they say they understand evaluation that they do, etc. One of the greatest mistakes that can be made is to assume that something is taking place without adequate information that assures that this is in fact so. This condition applies to the teacher in the classroom, the administrators of the school, evaluators, and district administrators.

11. Provide the Mechanics or Necessary Material. When the mechanics of evaluation, or logistics, are provided, adaptation can take place. People will not involve themselves in activities when they have to develop everything. The more that is provided for them, the more that participants will be able to adapt to meet their own individual needs and thus concentrate on action rather than development. This would mean providing forms, plans, steps to be followed, etc. Providing materials does not of itself ensure that anything will take place, but does increase the likelihood.

12. Evaluation as a Continuing Process, Rather than a Single Event. To be examined as to effectiveness and impact on the system, evaluation must be considered as a long-term involvement, one which is continually evolving. The use of evaluation in education as an effective strategy for program improvement is still in its early stages. One cannot consider evaluation to be an inherent aspect of the educational process. In many ways, the process of evaluation is foreign to educators with much development and institutionalization to be completed. The effectiveness of evaluation as a strategy for instructional improvement should be judged in this light. Change requires time and patience.

If the foregoing conditions are attended to, non-existent or insufficient ones provided for, and an attempt is made to ensure that the necessary structure is adhered to, strong possibilities exist that educators will become conversant with evaluation and testing and thus utilize these strategies regularly and effectively. It should be a priority purpose of evaluators to both assist educators to address these important conditions and to become

comfortable with evaluation. If evaluation strategy can be instituted and implemented throughout a system in a way that ensures that the information obtained will be relevant and will be utilized to impact the system in a positive manner then it is most probable that evaluation can, and will, result in substantive program improvement. From an experiential standpoint, the likelihood will increase if evaluators continue to press for the presence of these essential conditions.